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Abstract

She prefers to play with women. Men at this level have never learned the art of subtlety; they drive the ball without thinking of deflection, of actions and reactions, of balance and counter-balance. They win because they hit hard and fast and because they believe they are invincible, especially against nipple and thighs. She can imagine what such men would be like in bed.

HELEN GILBERT

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Sometimes she plays her lover in hate. He is older than she is and has always preferred tennis. She believes she could beat him but she never does. It has something to do with her incomplete comprehension of physics: she knows that action and reaction are supposed to be equal and opposite, but she hasn't learned about deflection. So she tries to resist his power with strength, his deception with stealth, and his violence with equal threat. And when he throws his racquet at the wall in anger, her own rage trips her as it rises to match his. Once, when he hit her in the middle of a rally, the force of his swing left dark purple grid lines on her thigh. She deliberately wore skimpy shorts for days afterwards and fingered the bruise lovingly to remind herself about control.

Women who reach A-level know that squash is a game of angles. They eschew the violence of desire for the surety of physics and mathematics. They understand the properties of diagonals and can calculate the density of air in closed spaces. They have learned that velocity and direction are more crucial than sheer force; that a soft drop is sometimes more deadly than a hard drive; that any image of the ball beyond the glass back wall is just a chimera designed to distract control. Above all, they have tuned their bodies to refractions and echoes.

She thinks she'll reach A-level with just a bit more practice, so she hangs around the university courts on weekends, looking for an opponent who'll challenge her intellect and not just her breath. Sometimes she asks one of the men for a game, steeling herself against derision because she knows some of them think she'll be a pushover. 'We don't have time to waste on two-hit rallies and feeble boasts,' she reads in their eyes. Those who've come to know her make no such presumptions. Some are eager for revenge after their first loss. If she wins again, they'll shower away all trace of her and then drown their shame with a few beers and make excuses for their performance. She's heard similar excuses murmured between the sheets but she'll smile and joke about her own good luck. She knows better than to embarrass a man in front of his friends.

The squash center is teeming with sweaty male bodies as usual when she turns up at the end of semester and she is distracted by their musky odour though she tries not to inhale too deeply. She watches a few games before changing into

her gear because her head is cluttered up with work and she needs to tune in to angles before she starts to play.

She's almost ready to go onto the court when she notices him. At first she can't take her eyes off his arse. It is tight against his blue shorts and seems to be the fulcrum the rest of his body balances on. He's younger than most of the other men there, not much more than a kid really, she thinks, as her gaze focuses on the spot where his t-shirt doesn't quite reach his shorts. She wonders what her lover would say if he knew what she was thinking.

'Do you want a hit?' the squash player asks as he comes off the court towards her.

She wonders if he is mocking her but agrees to play because she can't forget about the grid-shaped bruise and its lesson on control.

She's surprised that he wants to practice some drills rather than playing a game for she knows he could beat her and she's never met a man who'd pass by the opportunity to affirm his prowess on the court, or elsewhere for that matter. But she's not about to ask for a thrashing and she could do with the practice anyway.

They spend a long time on the warm-up, at first a little uncoordinated as the rhythm of the drive-boast-drop sequence eludes them, but his patience relaxes her so she forgets about his bum and gives herself up to the joy of uncontrolled discipline, to the beauty of the ball in endless motion, as she finds the right direction for her boast so that he can drive back to her, adjusting his pace to hers until there is neither leader nor follower but simply infinite regression to the point where the ball and racquet meet and their muscles contract and relax without volition, where she feels the violence of winning or losing dissipate while their minds are free to delight in the sheer pleasure of angles until their bodies are both sated.

'You play really well.'

She expects him to add 'for a woman' and is almost disappointed when he doesn't. 'Thanks' seems like such a stupid response.

Afterwards, sweat still dripping down their foreheads, they talk. She vaguely notices that everyone else is leaving and reminds herself that her lover is expecting her for dinner, but the smell of the squash player's damp shirt keeps her there.

'I'm not doing anything tonight,' he says, finally.

'Neither am I,' she lies.

'I usually feel stuffed after squash but tonight I've still got lots of energy.'

'Yeah, me too.'

'I haven't been out much lately.' He sounds almost apologetic.

'I go to the movies a fair bit,' she says. 'There's a Norwegian one on at the uni theatre tonight. Sounds pretty good according to the blurb. It's a dramatisation of an ancient myth ... a kind of archetypal battle between good and evil.'

He says he doesn't care for violence, or myths for that matter, and then goes home — alone.

She didn't expect a drop shot and she doesn't like it one bit.

But the next week he asks her for a hit again. And the next...and next.... They develop more complicated drills and she learns to take the edge off a hard ball, to volley against fire, to calculate the arc of a high lob so that it floats to the nick in the back corner. On the court she forgets his age and gender but afterwards she's always aware of the sweat and the crease which his shorts don't quite hide. She tells herself that it's only her usual fetish for bums, that it's nothing to do with the game, that her relationship with her lover is inviolable. But summer's beginning and the purple shimmer of falling jacaranda flowers forms a haze in the air outside the courts and she can't help wondering why he doesn't ask her out. Is it out of deference for the faint wrinkles she's begun to develop around her eyes or does she have that ridden-hard-and-put-away-wet look of women who live too long with men they sleep with.

Finally, *she* asks *him* out. He arrives in a leather jacket and when she climbs on the back of his motorbike she can feel the heat of his buttocks. She is excited by his youth and believes she is tasting the life she felt she missed out on in her early twenties. But she won't allow herself more than a nibble at the apple because she knows the danger of a full bite. Her lover is out of town for the weekend, though that's not really an issue. She has learned how to resist other men's advances, how to enjoy the innuendoes without ever having to follow up on them, how to return the ball safely to the other side of the court. And she believes in fidelity.

But she is thinking in straight lines again and has forgotten about the game and how good it makes her feel.

Afterwards, she is not sure whether they made love or played squash, yet it hardly seems to matter. She only remembers another long warm-up and the taste of jacaranda flowers mingled with sweat. Later, they walk by the river, watching the city lights reflected in its waters. The night is warm and humid and feels good on her skin. When she looks at the reflections, she sees her body glow in the incandescent light angling towards them. She forgets that the waters are murky by day and she doesn't see traces of litter on the shore. And when he says he loves her, she believes him because she thinks she has found the angle where the lie of his words doesn't contradict the truth.

Next morning, she decides to leave her lover but it's not that easy. He's a poet, and he has written her pregnant with a loom before her knees. In his verse, she spins thread from raw wool, while strands of her long hair catch in the wheel she turns until she is woven firmly into the plot. She sees the warp and weft of his images as beautiful and benevolent because she cannot fight the truth of ink on a white page. She is, after all, thirty-three years old, and she knows that her body was not built for squash alone.

As the heat of the afternoon moves towards evening's storm, she thinks of the jacaranda again, and the urge to escape her lover returns. She wants to find the

rhythm of parting: the motion that will free her from his poetry, unseed his child, and leave her body unappropriated. So she goes to the courts and practices for hours, sometimes by herself and then with the squash player.

But she finds that actions do not speak louder than words.

When her lover comes back he wants some exercise, so they play. She knows she should have refused him but the lure of the game is too strong and she thinks she has developed the self control she lacked, so she flexes her muscles in anticipation, thinking of the squash player and the drills, and the questions of balance.

Her lover wins the toss but she remains confident and returns his first serve with ease. She is perfectly calm through the first two games as they rally, winning through sheer persistence and concentration until, in the third, his temper begins to get under her skin. She tells herself that his anger is painless, that it is not directed at her. She knows she can only win if she does not lose herself. But he is bending the rules, calling for lets when he doesn't have a chance of reaching the ball, disputing the line calls, blocking her view with his body, and so she begins to fight according to *his* game because she is not strong enough to sustain her own. He wins ten-nine, then nine-seven, and now they are two games all.

In desperation, before the last one begins she conjures up the squash player but his image won't hold still on the court and his bum distracts her and she can't remember how to balance power with control.

She is losing: losing herself, losing the squash player, losing the game, and most of all, losing the idea of angles, as her balls seem to ricochet in all directions.

When he hits her, she is only one point from defeat.

'I'm sorry,' he says as he sees the hurt in her eyes.

'I'm OK,' she replies. 'Your serve.'

She doesn't hate him for the cut above her eyes and the blood running down her face....

'Let's call it quits,' he offers.

'Your serve, eight-three,' she insists, brushing his concern away.

She doesn't hate him for the pain....

'I don't want to play anymore,' he says.

'Your serve,' she repeats.

She wouldn't even hate him all that much for beating her....

But he lays down his racquet and walks off the court.

'Come on,' she screams after him, tasting blood on her lips. 'Just serve the fucking ball.'

She hates him most of all for refusing to finish the game.